

FRESHPAVED NOTE: There's a popular sociological argument referred to as "nature versus nurture". The argument debates the effect environment has on our lives, and to what degree. If we characterize our environment by the collection of options available, these options play a defining role in life. It follows then, the more good options we present to children, the better.

Now, take a moment to consider the limited options available to a child from a single-parent, lower income household. As the Director for Stoked Mentoring, Steve Larosiliere considers the limited options available to these children every day. Steve created Stoked with the mission to develop successful teens with opportunity, knowledge, mentoring, and coaching. He points out, "these children may not have the opportunities in life that some of us take for granted." Stoked partners "at risk" youth with successful professional adults to learn to skate, snowboard, and surf. Basically, Stoked presents good opportunities to kids who need them.

Growing up with foster children, Steve developed an unconventional perspective on family and community that is refreshing and enlightening. He is very familiar with the children in his program, and he understands that connecting with these kids is the key to mentoring them.

Please enjoy this story about Stoked and Steve's passion to create new opportunities for kids. The photos were taken by Francois Portmann at the first Skate Mentor session during the summer of 2005. Also, please visit the Stoked website at www.stokedmentoring.org, and inquire about the "Friends of Stoked" program to make the circle bigger.



MR. OPPORTUNITY

>> JEFF GAITES

PHOTOS: FRANCOIS PORTMANN

Steve Larosiliere makes sacrifices for the things he believes in. Those things include family, friends, and community. About four years ago, Steve left a successful marketing company to pursue a life mentoring children in the not-for-profit world. Steve believes "when you start working for other people, working beyond yourself, things start to flow." Eventually, his passion for board sports evolved into a desire to create something new - something that would connect with the kids and expose them to new opportunities. "At the time, I was up in British

Columbia snowboarding, looking around at the mountains and nature." Steve recalls, "I had to find a way to get these kids thinking bigger than their neighborhoods." That "way" turned out to be the Stoked Mentoring program.

Steve reached out to his network within the mentoring community and began designing a program that incorporated skating, snowboarding, and surfing. He wanted to match two beginners together, so they could push and motivate each other. Steve explains, "These kids see what they can do with practice, determination,

encouragement, and resiliency. Then, they're able to succeed in life."

Steve describes the Stoked formula for success, "Skate Mentor teaches kids about positive social habits, communications skills, networking skills, having fun, and being able to do something that you would never normally do. Snow Mentor takes children to new environments where we talk about things like overcoming obstacles, setting goals, creativity, and remaining positive. Surf Mentor teaches kids about values for a successful life. Respect,

trust, understanding. These are things that we don't get taught in school. Some of us have learned this from our families. But some of these kids don't have families that teach them these types of values."

At the beginning and end of every Stoked session, Steve brings all the participants together in a circle. Each person is asked to speak up on a particular topic, like "respect", or "encouragement", relating to that day's activities. One kid, Felix, gives a recap along with a little self-motivation, "I did my best. I tried and I fell twice, but it was fun. I don't take the pain; I don't believe in pain, I believe in myself." So, the sessions unfold like "organized play-time". Organized so the adults and children learn together and motivate each other. Organized to teach the children about life outside of math and science.

Organized to bond the adults and the children. Organized, but still play-time.

When the participants describe Stoked, the word "fun" comes up a lot. One of the teenagers, Jose, enthusiastically explains, "This is about having fun. That's what this program is about. Meeting good people. Everybody bonds no matter what your race. You're just doing your thing, just having fun, that's what life is all about." Jose characterizes something that none of the adults want to jinx by mentioning out loud - these kids are having fun, they are connecting, coming out of their shells, and seeing a new world of opportunities. Instead, the adults share knowing smiles with raised eyebrows and winks because they know that Stoked is working.

Unfortunately, Stoked is not entirely fun and games. The business of transporting kids to the

beaches and mountains costs money. Not to mention the boards, helmets, and all the other gear needed to outfit the program. Stoked operates from private and corporate contributions and regular fundraising events. As a result, a large chunk of Steve's time and energy is dedicated to raising money to support and expand the program. On the bright side, Steve loves his work and takes great pride in the effects Stoked is having in the community. With a large grin, he assures, "These kids see that there's a different world out there, outside their boundaries, outside their neighborhoods, outside their community. They can connect with someone completely different because they have something in common...something like skateboarding which is nothing but plain-old, healthy fun, and that's what we're giving kids. That opportunity." 